Interview with CAPT Joseph Page Pollard, MC, USN (Ret.), physician aboard USS *Yorktown* (CV-5) during the Battle of Midway. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 11 January 2001, Arlington, VA. (1913-2006)

Could you tell me the circumstances of you being assigned to *Yorktown*?

I was on duty at Pensacola and received orders as a flight surgeon to the *Yorktown* shortly after Pearl Harbor. I joined her at Pearl Harbor. The reason for the delay in my joining her was that the *Yorktown* had participated in the Battle of the Coral Sea and then returned to Pearl and I joined her there.

The ship had been in the battle and had been badly damaged and had gotten back and you witnessed all the activity trying to get it ready.

Yes. When I went aboard ship there were temporary steel plates on the flight deck. There was obvious damage to many places to the ship. I was told that her combat integrity was reduced by about a third. Since the Battle of Midway was anticipated, a great effort was made in the yard at Pearl Harbor to do everything they could to get her shipshape. When I went aboard, the ship was teeming with civilian employees from the shipyard. There was a great effort to load munitions, to load food and all types of supplies. The ship was a beehive of activity when I reported aboard.

The ship finally left Pearl Harbor on the 30th of May and put to sea. Can you describe that?

Before we put to sea, we were put into drydock for a short while for inspection of the underwater part of the ship. After we came out of drydock, we did go to sea and there still was a great deal of repair activity going on. We had a new air group come aboard, and there was a great deal of activity by the air group to get themselves accustomed to the ship. When we went out to sea, we had all types of air exercises. We had drills of every kind you can think of aboard ship. The medical department was preparing for what obviously would be a very important event for them. There were airplanes towing sleeves with gunnery practice. We had anti-aircraft guns aboard carriers at that time. There was a great deal of anti-aircraft practice.

The ship was a bedlam of noise and activity but it was all organized. The crew had been down in the Coral Sea and had experienced combat. So they were well trained as to what to do. We had additional training in first aid and that type of thing for everyone who was on the flight deck. I think the medical department was well prepared when we went out.

You witnessed a very unfortunate accident during that evolution. Two planes very close on the flight deck and one crashed into the other.

Our air group was practicing and getting accustomed to the ship as we went out towards Midway. A very unfortunate accident happened. A lieutenant commander came in and landed. As he was taxiing forward, a fighter plane came in and missed his cable. As he went forward, he landed on the back of the airplane the lieutenant commander was in. The propeller of the fighter plane cut through the canopy and almost decapitated the lieutenant commander. That was the only accident we had during practice on our way out to the battle.

As you headed out, it would have been about the 1st of June. Everybody was busy making preparations for battle. There were people getting their antiflash clothing, their gas masks and helmets.

Yes. We were issued helmets and life jackets and gas masks. We had additional training along the lines of the use of emergency equipment. We made sure that we had sufficient stretchers that were located at various stations around the ship where they would likely be needed. And supplies were checked in all the battle dressing stations. It was a very active time.

You thought you might need extra water during this.

This happened when we were actually getting ready for the battle. This was on the 4th of June when we were laying out equipment for the battle. We noticed that our water tank had sprung a leak and so we got someone to come and fix the water tank and fill it with water. It was a very fortunate circumstance because we desperately need that water later on when we had stretcher patients who were going into shock. Because of battle conditions, we could not move them to the sick bay. Right at that moment we had water we could give the wounded.

What was the morale on the ship at this time?

The morale on the ship was the best I've ever seen. It was absolutely top notch. Of course, everybody was fearful as you normally would be when you're going into battle but you couldn't imagine a higher morale that there was aboard ship.

How did you learn that the Japanese were coming? Was it scuttlebutt? Did someone tell you?

I was in sick bay early in the morning of the 4th of June until about 10:30 holding eye, ear, nose, and throat sick call. At that time I went up to the flight deck area and assumed my duty at Battle Dressing Station Number 1. I remained at Battle Dressing Station Number 1 throughout the rest of the day until I abandoned ship.

When I arrived at Battle Dressing Station Number 1, we were arming our airplanes. At that time I found out that one of our scouting planes that had gone out earlier that morning, had returned and dropped a note on the deck stating that the Japanese fleet had been seen and that they were approximately 200 miles away in a certain direction coming towards us at 25 knots. Of course, 200 miles was beyond the range of our airplanes to go out and be able to get back. So we did not launch at that time.

The bombers and torpedo planes were lined up with the fighter planes ahead of them ready for takeoff. They took off as soon as the Jap fleet was deemed to be within range. Until they returned, we were free at the battle dressing station to check our supplies, get ourselves ready for whatever might happen. This covered lunch hour where I, for instance, went down to the ward room and got a sandwich and then came back up.

Did you watch the planes being gassed and the ordnance being put on?

Yes, I did. We did not make a strike until about 2:30, as I recall. In the interim time, we had the opportunity in the battle dressing station to break out all of the gear we needed and make sure that our litters were in place and we were ready to receive casualties when and if they came.

Our planes took off. It was an uneventful departure.

About 2:30 our planes began to return. They were positioned around the carrier with the worst shot up bomber first followed by the other planes. We took aboard five or six TBDs that were shot up so you wondered how they would still stay in the air. We had fighter planes over the ship to protect the ship and one of these fighter planes ran low on fuel. So they slipped that

plane into the landing line and he came in too hot and too high and dove for the flight deck. His airplane somersaulted and ended up upside down with him under it.

As the flight surgeon, I was the first one under the airplane to attempt to get the pilot out. He crawled out under his own power and we headed back across the deck to my battle dressing station.

The pilot was uninjured?

The pilot was uninjured.

The *Enterprise* attack was finished by this time.

The *Enterprise* attack was finished. The ship was over the horizon out of sight but as I looked out in that direction, when they launched I could see their airplanes in the air and it looked like a swarm of bees way out in the distance.

After you saw the crash landing of the pilot, the battle was already underway.

As I was on the way back from that crashed airplane to the battle dressing station, general quarters was sounded. I could look up in the sky and see airplanes up there. I could see dog fights. I saw a plane spiral down into the ocean streaming fire. The anti-aircraft guns right beside me were firing full blast. The sky was full of flak puffs that you see in the pictures. The Jap airplanes were upon us.

And then a 500-pound bomb came from somewhere.

As I was looking at what was going on, my good chief pharmacist's mate caught me by the arm and said, "You and I better take cover." So we went into the battle dressing station and lay down on the steel deck. Peculiar things go through your mind at a time like that. I'm lying down flat on my stomach on the deck and I'm thinking about. . . "If this deck rises under me, my head is going to hit the steel deck and that won't be good." So I took an arm and put it under my head. Then I said to myself, "You know, if my arm gets caught between my head and the deck, I'm gonna have a broken arm."

So while I'm figuring all this out, all hell breaks loose. As the bomb goes off right outside my battle dressing station and we're right in the middle of it.

What did you do after the bomb hit?

Let me tell you something else before I answer that question. We had three bombs that caused us casualties. One was a delayed action bomb that went down very close to the stack all the way through the island structure, through the ward room below, and down into the engineering spaces. And when that bomb went off, it blew out the fire for the boilers--power for the ship. So with power gone, the ship went dead in the water and, of course, all the lights went off.

Another one that caused casualties was a bomb that missed the ship but hit the water very close to the stern of the ship on the starboard side. The catwalk in that area was full of men who had taken cover off the flight deck. Bomb fragments from that bomb swept through the catwalk and caused a lot of casualties. It killed a number of people. Those casualties came to my dressing station.

Incidently, my dressing station incorporated the entire island structure and all of the flight deck, and the catwalks to the flight deck.

Now to get back to the bomb that fell right outside my station. It was very close to Number 3 and Number 4 anti-aircraft gun mounts which were right outside my station. The gun mounts were manned by about 40 men, 20 of whom were killed instantly and the rest were casualties of one sort or another that descended on me. A number of people who were around the flight deck in unprotected areas were hit and they descended on me. It was bedlam. People came in so fast, they just swarmed in. The ones that couldn't walk, of course, were brought in by people who were around and by the pharmacist's mates. We put them in the good old Navy wire stretchers we had which served our purposes wonderfully well.

The first thing we had to do was stop bleeding. There were people with feet blown off, with arms blown off, with legs blown off, and with all sorts of body wounds. Many of them required tourniquets to stop the bleeding. We gave morphine and got the stretchers in on the deck of the battle dressing station. We filled the deck with stretchers and we didn't have a enough room so we spread back into the parachute loft behind us and filled that with stretchers. Then we moved into the passageway and put stretchers there.

A little incident happened there. We had stretchers in the passageway and there were fires in the island structure from where the bomb had gone done through. So the firefighters were fighting the fire. They dragged a hose--a water line down the corridor that we had stretchers in. And when they turned the water on, it turns out that the hose had been punctured by bomb fragments and our patients were in the middle of a shower. Of course, we had to move them.

You ended up going up on the flight deck and the first thing you came across was that famous . . .

When I could get out of my dressing station, I went out on the flight deck and there were Number 3 and Number 4 gun mounts. One of the first things I saw was the trainer of one of the guns sat in a seat. And the seat was low enough so inside the splinter shield around the gun mount his legs and pelvis were completely undamaged, but above the belt, all that there was left of him was a few vertebrae of his backbone just sticking up and sort of hanging over backwards. And the rest of him had completely disappeared.

At that point, the ship was dead in the water.

The ship went dead in the water when the bomb blew out the fires down below. And one of the worst things we thought was that black smoke was pouring from the stack. And we are dead in the water and we're putting out black smoke that must have been able to be seen for miles and miles and miles. We said, "We're are a sitting duck." We knew that the Japs had a submarine in the area and also we knew that the Japs knew where we were now. It wasn't a comfortable feeling.

At some point you looked up and saw white smoke coming out of the stack.

The chief engineer was able to get the fires re-lighted, and when the fires got re-lighted, our power came back on, our lights came back on. Puffs of white steam came out of the stack and oh, were we happy! Furthermore, from being dead in the water, the ship started to move so we were hopeful that we would get underway. And sure enough, we did start to get underway.

At this time, a very fortunate thing happened to us. The senior medical officer of the ship came up to see how we were doing up in Battle Dressing Station 1. We seized the opportunity to use his influence to get the forward aircraft elevator for use to take our stretcher patients down to

the hanger deck. So we lowered the forward elevator with stretchers and got them down to the hangar deck. It just turned out to be very fortunate because if we'd had to abandon ship with all those stretchers up there, I don't know how we could have ever gotten them off. Patients, of course, were supposed to go to the sick bay but we had another attack and those plans didn't go through.

I want to get into the second attack.

Let's talk about that. Suddenly, about 1600, I believe it was, more Japanese planes showed. What happened?

As we were moving stretchers below, the ship speed got up to 22 knots and we required 30 knots for flight operations. But we were on the way to 30 knots. Some of our airplanes were still flying around. The airplanes had enough fuel to get to one of the other carriers, which was over the horizon--the *Enterprise* primarily--left from that landing circle that I described further back. They left that circle and headed for the *Enterprise*. So those planes got to the *Enterprise*. The airplanes that didn't have enough fuel to get to the *Enterprise* were stuck with us with no place to land. So they were landing around us in the water. Most of them were trying to land close to the ship hoping that the pilots could swim to the ship. They had life jackets and were in pretty good shape.

But when we got to 22 knots, it was decided that we would go back to accepting the planes that could get in. So that's when we had to abandon using the forward elevator to take casualties below. But most of our stretcher patients had gotten down. Of course, all the ambulatory patients had gone down to the sick bay and our problem was the stretcher patients.

At that time, before we could take on planes, GQ sounded. The Japs knew where we were then and they had sent another attack against us. These were torpedo planes but we didn't know that at the time.

So GQ sounded and I headed into the battle dressing station and lay down on the deck. In very short order, there was a terrific noise and the ship shuddered and the deck came up under me. It couldn't have been anything but a torpedo. And I'm lying there and I said to myself, "Boy, that's one torpedo. We can take that one but I hope we don't get any more."

By the time I got that through my mind, here came another one and the ship began to list. That's a bad feeling to have the ship begin to list on you. And it listed and listed and kept going over. It went over to where I thought it was about a 30 degree list. But reading the reports of it later, it was a 26 degree list. But that's a pretty good list. When I went out on the flight deck, I felt that I should be very careful at the way I walked. If I slipped on the flight deck, the angle was so great that it was quite possible that I would skid all the way across the flight deck and go in the water on the far side. The angle of the deck was that steep.

At this time, the word came over the speaker, "Prepare to abandon ship." There was a patient in a stretcher by me whose foot had been blown off. He heard that the same time I did as I was there walking by him. He said to me, "What does this mean for us?" And then he turned his head away and figured he'd never make it. I didn't have any answer for him and didn't know what to say.

This patient was one of the few stretcher patients that we had left in Battle Dressing Station Number 1 and so we took those stretchers, tied ropes to them, and let them over the high side of the ship down to where there were life rafts below. Most of the life rafts, by that time, were full of casualties that had been put on from the hangar deck level but we added the few that we had topside. There was a very cooperative lieutenant. His name was Wilson. He helped me

get the lines together to get the stretchers over the side, which I appreciated very much at the time.

Then after we got the stretchers off, I began to search the island structure and the catwalks to see if we'd missed anyone that was alive. We didn't want to abandon ship and leave anybody aboard who was alive. I searched the island structure and then went aft where the bomb had gone off underwater and had swept a lot of the catwalk. I didn't find anyone alive.

There was an "Abandon ship," but I was somewhere and didn't hear it. So I didn't know the sign was on and everybody else was leaving and I was still aboard ship looking for wounded. I'm back there by the catwalk and I look over and there's the water down there full of heads of people bobbing in it. There are life rafts beside them. And I'm standing there thinking that "Gee, I better go. Everybody else is over there. Maybe I had better go over the side."

I notice a lone figure coming out of the island structure and walk across the deck straight for me. And I said to myself, "Who could this be?" And as he walked up to me, I recognized him. It was CAPT Buckmaster. He was our skipper. So he walked up to me, and I can remember the words he said: "Navy regulations state that the commanding officer shall be the last to leave the ship and I'm ready to go."

So I said, "Aye, aye, sir." As I went to the rope, I said, "Captain, I just finished inspecting the catwalk back aft and I can assure you that I couldn't find anyone who was alive." That was the last we said, and we went down. There were two ropes down there. The Captain and I are going down two ropes side by side. I'm a little ahead of him. The Captain stayed with his line and went right on down to the water. When I got to the armor belt, I was getting tired. We didn't have knots in the rope and we had to let ourselves down with the strength of our arms.

When I got to the armor belt, I decided that I would stop and rest a minute. The ship was listing enough so that one could walk on the armor belt without any danger of falling over the side. So I walked back along the armor belt about 30 feet or so until I came to another line that was over. I decided to go down that line. One reason I took that line was because it went down to a life raft in the water that was loaded with litter and ambulatory patients and I wanted to be close to the patients.

As I was going down that line, part of my life jacket got caught in my hands and I started to slide on the rope. As I looked at the rope, it was covered with blood from both of my hands where I had cut the skin off my hands. I looked down and saw an open spot with no heads in it right below me so I turned loose and dropped the last 15 feet into the water. I swam over to the life raft and there was no room for anyone on it but there was a line around it so I held on to it.

The sea was fortunately calm but the water was covered with fuel oil. When the fuel oil gets in your eyes, it burns like fire. It gets up your nose and it gets in your mouth and you cannot help swallowing it. And when you swallow the fuel oil, you start to vomit to get it up. So, in the water, you spend a part of your time hanging on to a line and vomiting up black oil.

Meanwhile, the Captain had come down and was in the vicinity of the same life raft. The destroyer *Russell* [ ] came by and sent a whaleboat over to pick up people. The whaleboat was towing a life raft. The whaleboat had too much speed and one of the mess attendants couldn't hang on and fell off. He couldn't swim. And there he is out in the water shouting and screaming and throwing his hands up in the air and kicking. So the Captain swam over to hold him up. The Captain was having some difficulty getting him quieted down. One of the men in the water swam over and helped the two of them and brought them back to the life raft.

You were now concerned about the fact that the ship was sinking and you were too close.

The life rafts were lined up alongside the ship the way they had been loaded. The way the sea was running, we couldn't get the life rafts away from the ship. It seemed like there was almost a magnetic attraction between the ship and the life rafts. We felt we were in great danger because if the ship rolled over, which it might do at any time, the suction of the ship going down would take us all down with it. So we tried desperately to get the life rafts away from the ship. It turned out that the way we got them away from the ship was to paddle them along the side of the ship and go off towards the stern. And that way we could get them off.

How long were you in the water?

I was in the water two hours and a half. There was no room on the life raft so that was all the time in the water. The destroyer *Hughes* [DD-410] came by and several people were able to swim out and catch the cargo net on the side of the *Hughes*.

Then there was a submarine presence alert. They went to general quarters and the *Hughes* went to full speed ahead. It was quite dangerous. If you are close to the side of the side of the ship and it goes to full speed ahead, the suction from the propellers pull under the ship and through the propellers. You either don't want to be close to the ship or you want to get aboard the ship.

We had a couple passes by that were unsuccessful. The *Hughes* came by and put lines over but they weren't able to get anyone to speak of. The *Hammann* [DD-412] came by and everything seemed to be quiet around so I decided I couldn't stay in the water much longer. There was no place on the life raft and there was no point in just staying there and drowning so I might as well swim for the *Hammond*. So I did and fortunately I caught hold of the cargo net that was over the side. The thought that went through my mind was when I reached out and got a grip on that cargo net, whatever the *Hammond* did wasn't going to make any difference to me. You would have had to pull my arm off to get me off that thing.

I clambered up the cargo net. And when I got up to deck level, two or three people reached over and grabbed me and I was safe.

What became of the casualties?

The destroyers were not able to recover the casualties. The cruiser *Astoria* [CA-34]came around and they picked them up. The Captain ended up aboard the *Astoria*. I believe that the Captain was picked up by the *Hughes* and transferred to the *Astoria*. As far as I know, we picked up no casualties aboard the destroyers.

What happened to the casualties you got off the ship? What about the man with the missing foot that you mentioned earlier?

They had all been put aboard life rafts and then they were picked up by the *Astoria*. When I got to Pearl Harbor, I went up to the naval hospital at Aiea Heights to make rounds on all of the patients that had come from my battle dressing station. As I was walking by the foot of one of the beds, I see someone with a big grin on his face. He was the fellow that had said to me, "What is going to happen to us." So I grinned back at him. We were both very happy.

Well, it's been almost 60 years since all this happened. Do you have any thoughts about the fact that you participated in one of the greatest naval battles in history? It was the battle that changed the course of the war in the Pacific. And you were there.

Well, it was something that when I joined the Navy, I really didn't intend to do. But it came along and I did it. The fact that I survived it. Since then, I've been very proud to have been in it. I guess I was fortunate in a way that I really saw the battle. I was on the flight deck. I was where the great majority of the casualties of the ship were. I took care of them. There was no other medical officer to divide the honor with. The only one who came up to see me was the senior medical officer who came up for a few minutes to see how I was doing. And he appeared to be happy and then he was gone. I really had the opportunity to engage in something that one wouldn't expect to engage in one's lifetime.

One last question. Is there any question I should have asked you that I didn't?

I think I could say that this was an introduction to a career in the Navy that I really never intended to do. But it was an introduction to aircraft carriers, to naval aviation, and it was a precursor to my having gone to sea on four aircraft carriers, two submarines, a destroyer. When I was younger, I would never have expected that I would ever encounter. It was a very valuable experience.